

NORTANA Reading Group Guide

Publication Information

The Necessary Rituals of Maren Gripe

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Translator: Barbara Haveland

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INTRODUCTION

This relatively short novel is a riveting story of how a small fjord community, and in particular the irresistible Maren Gripe is affected by the arrival of a stranger. While the mystery of what actually happens to Maren is gradually revealed by various members of her community, deeper

universal questions regarding the effects of change and the nature of truth in our modern daily lives are raised.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Set in the early twentieth century in an isolated coastal village, this story begins on the night Maren Gripe is woken by the sound of a rope falling on the deck of a foreign ship. When the Dutch sailor, Leo Tybrin Beck, steps ashore and visits the local pub, Maren undergoes a profound change. An alluring woman who has always been in control of her actions; - she abstains from sex and meat on Saturdays, and never drinks, - Maren is swept up in a whirlwind of erotic desire that leads her to behave differently than she has ever done. Unlike all the other men on the island, Tybrin Beck is seemingly impervious to Maren's charms, but his presence and effect on Maren quickly become the catalyst for the entire community to start behaving erratically. Chaos erupts; individuals begin quarrelling, fighting, vandalizing and stealing, curing sheds are burned, and the heather on the moors mysteriously catches fire. Eventually as Maren accepts the inevitability of her situation, she acts drastically to bring this community back into some kind of order.

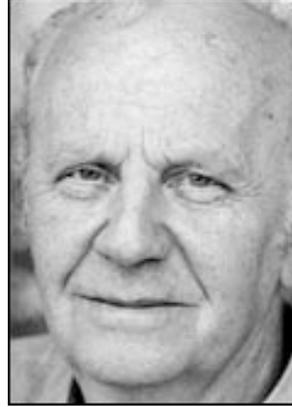
The events of the five days are told through a series of overlapping accounts by various members of the community. While Maren's mother and husband perhaps show most understanding for what has happened, the reports gathered by local officials, (the pastor, the constable, the psychiatrist,) ultimately contradict each other, and the local judge despairs of ever discovering the actual truth.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is Leo Tybrin Beck the cause of Maren's troubles? Why is he unmoved by her charms?
2. Do you agree with the locals that Maren Gripe went mad on the night of Beck's arrival?
3. Discuss Maren's relationship to her husband and her mother.
4. How does Maren influence the society around her?
5. In what ways are Maren and Leo Tybrin Beck similar? Why do you think Lønn emphasizes certain similarities between these two characters?
6. Why are Maren's rituals necessary?
7. Why do you think Lønn uses different narrators to tell Maren's story?
8. How would you describe Lønn's use of language? How does this relate to the story of Maren?
9. Leo Tybrin Beck represents change for this small coastal community. Do you think the way the community deals with him is typical of how isolated communities deal with change today?
10. In an interview, Lønn has said this story contains elements of the *vandrehistorie*, or migrant tale. What elements of the story might be recognized in other coastal communities in different countries?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1936 in Kristiansand on the southern coast of Norway, Lønn knew since adolescence that he wanted to be a writer. Having traveled and lived in Europe, primarily Spain, as a young man, his literary debut came in 1966 with a collection of short stories: *The Procession*. While Lønn's



talents were early recognized by his fellow authors, it was not until 1993 that he became widely known to the Norwegian reading public after the publication of the short story collection *Thrane's Method and Other Stories*. Since that time this modern prose writer has been awarded several major literary prizes, most notably the Nordic Council's Literary Prize (often dubbed "the little Nobel prize" in Scandinavia) for the short story collection *What Shall We do Today and Other Novellas* in 1996. Lønn uses a detached narrative voice and charged subtext to analyze the condition of the modern individual in an ever-changing world. A writer who considers reality a kind of orderly chaos or chaotic order, Lønn fills his work with ambiguity and mystery. While outwardly little may actually happen in his tales, they reveal the fragility of identity and make the reader face deep existential questions.

[For an interesting article on Lønn in English refer to *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century Norwegian Writers*. Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman, 2004: pp. 233-238.]

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR/TRANSLATION

This translation is, according to the author himself, true to the original Norwegian and does not omit any of the nuances of Lønn's masterful language use. Barbara Haveland is a translator of Norwegian and Danish and has been awarded prizes for her work.

OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY THIS AUTHOR

Tom Reber's Last Retreat. Trans. David McDuff; London: Boyars, 1992.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

If you enjoyed this book, we suggest the following other Nordic writers available in English.

Kjell Askildsen *A Sudden Liberating Thought.* Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Norwich: Norvik Press, 1994. ISBN 1870041240.
Cora Sandel. *The Silken Thread: Stories and Sketches.* Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. Peter Owen, 1986. ISBN 0720606586.
Tarjei Vesaas *The Birds.* Trans. Torbjørn Støverud & Michael Barnes. London: Peter Owen, 1995. ISBN 0720611431.
Lars Saabye Christensen. *The Half Brother.* Trans. Kenneth Steven. London: Arcadia Publishers. 2003. ISBN 1559707151.
Knut Hamsun. *Mysteries.* Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. New York: Penguin, 2001. ISBN 0141186186.
Knut Hamsun. *Dreamers.* Trans. Tom Geddes. New York: New Directions, 1996. ISBN 0811213218.

LINKS TO REVIEWS IN ENGLISH

http://www.harpercollins.com.au/authors/author_interview.cfm?ISBN=&Author=0018391 – an interview with the author about this book.

This NORTANA Study guide was prepared by Tanya Thresher, Assistant Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

NORTANA READING GROUP GUIDES

NORTANA Reading Group Guides present works of Norwegian literature to an English-reading public. By presenting these introductory materials, questions for discussion, and other suggested readings we wish to enhance your reading experience, as well as to share our enthusiasm for Norwegian literature and encourage you to explore further what Norwegian literature has to offer.

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